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Take the Red Pill, Blame Feminism: Victimization Narratives Across the Manosphere

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Abstract

Male supremacist online communities have been linked to a number of negative outcomes over the last decade, including alt-right mobilizations, digitally-mediated campaigns of harassment against prominent feminist figures, and incidents of mass violence. These digital spaces are aligned in their commitment to narratives of male victimization at the hands of women and feminism, but are somewhat heterogenous in their topical foci and applications of male supremacist ideologies. Such variation reflects both differences in how groups conceive of the problems of facing men, and potentially contributes to the different types of harm wrought by these communities.

Keywords

men-s rights, social movements, hegemonic masculinity, feminism, patriarchy

Male supremacist online communities have been linked to a number of negative social outcomes over the last decade, including alt-right mobilizations (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Lyons 2017), digitally-mediated campaigns of harassment against prominent feminist figures (Braithwaite 2016; Salter 2018), and incidents of mass violence (Kelly, DiBranco, and DeCook 2022). The connections between these digital

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spaces and their deleterious social consequences have led scholars to study these communities from several theoretical perspectives–as sites of radicalization that incite violence (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020); as spaces in which new hybrid masculinities are constructed (Ging 2019; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016); and as affective publics contributing to (primarily white) male identity politics that either serve as a gateway into far-right engagement (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Ging 2019; Lyons 2017; Mamié, Ribeiro, and West 2021), or qualify as far-right participation in and of itself (DiBranco 2022). A common thread across this body of work is that men within 'the manosphere'–the loose network of virulently misogynistic websites, blogs, and forums that comprise the bulk of male supremacist activity–all share narratives of male victimization (Ging 2019; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022); at the same time, the distinct groups housed within the manosphere appear to hold differing views regarding the particularities of this victimization–its form, supporting mechanisms, and potential solutions (Lilly 2016; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). As a result, manosphere communities appear both unified and divided. On the one hand, these groups differ in their collectivistic versus individualistic orientations towards the problems and solutions posed by men's perceived marginalization (Lilly 2016; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). On the other hand, they are ultimately rather united in where they place the locus of blame for men's perceived suffering: on women, feminism, and feminism's success in reshaping social relations. Understanding the specific victimization narratives present across manosphere communities, then, is important both because it illuminates the varying ways men engage with antifeminist, antiwoman ideologies, and also because it serves as a starting point for explaining the range of negative outcomes that have emerged from male supremacist online spaces.

Five primary groups are housed within the manosphere. *Men's rights activists* (MRAs) rally around claims that men are the ones truly impacted by gender inequality, and that they suffer from a number of plights including pressures from gender roles, institutional biases against men in the areas of criminal justice and family law, and a social focus on women's issues, which they view as either less serious or entirely manufactured (Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016). *Men going their own way* (MGTOWs) echo many of these sentiments and, based on these grievances and a sense of men being under threat by women and feminist forces, advocate for the eschewal of social or romantic relationships with women (Lin 2017; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). *Pick-up artists* (PUAs) and misogynist *incels* (incels) focus less broadly on perceived social issues, focusing instead on how shifting gender dynamics have impacted heterosexual relations. Both groups believe that cis men are at risk of being excluded from sex (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019); however, PUAs view individual self-improvement and the learning of 'game' (i.e., seduction techniques and sexual strategy) as the solution to this risk of exclusion, while incels take a more fatalistic stance, viewing success in the (hetero)sexual marketplace as resulting not from skill or cultivatable qualities, but from immutable biological characteristics. They believe these characteristics determine men's place in a hierarchy of masculinity, which then dictates their relative value within the so-called sexual

marketplace. From the incel perspective, then, feminism has victimized men by facilitating women's choice in sexual partners and excluding some men from access to sex with women (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022; Salojärvi et al. 2020). A final group, The Red Pill (TRP), combines many of these elements to validate claims of men's victimization at the hands of women and feminism (Mountford 2018; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022).

In all cases, these men draw on a sense of men and masculinity as denigrated or under attack to construct a set of grievances, and to position themselves as occupying a marginalized social position in contemporary society due to feminism's influence (Ging 2019; Lilly 2016; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). This is in many ways a reflection of narratives that have always been present within the antifeminist movement–that men are the real victims of gender inequality, and that their problems go largely ignored as attention and resources are monopolized to address women's issues (Menzies 2007; Messner 2016). At the same time, the unique affordances of the web have combined with a general trend towards increasing far-right extremism to exacerbate antifeminist sentiments and encourage the growth of explicitly misogynistic ideologies. Manosphere adherents combine preexisting antifeminist narratives with a biological essentialist worldview and conspiratorial logics to position feminism as a relatively overt strategy for serving women's interests and oppressing men (Ging 2019; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). Termed 'red pill' theory, this pseudoscientific worldview constructs rigid hierarchies between cisgender men and women, and among cisgender men themselves; most men are either *alphas*, hegemonically masculine men who are desirable to women, or *betas*, insufficiently masculine men who will be ignored or taken advantage of by women (Ging 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Feminism, within this framework, is a self-serving attempt by women to subvert natural power dynamics and to establish (and maintain) women's dominance over men (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022).

'Taking the red pill,' then, is seen by manosphere participants as a first step in both acknowledging their own suffering at the hands of feminist forces, and in addressing these perceived injustices. Red pill theory provides a basis for this sense of victimization on two levels. At the structural level, it reverses claims that systemic gender inequality uniquely disadvantages women, and it allows men within these groups to construct a sense of *collective* victimhood at the hands of feminism. This is significant not only because of the antifeminist backlash it conjures, but also because this broader sense of masculinity under threat serves as a throughline connecting male supremacist groups with other segments of the far-right, including the alt-right, religious fundamentalists, and conservative authoritarian movements (Kaiser 2022). MRAs and MGTOWs in particular use a number of discursive strategies to uphold claims that men are the truly disadvantaged group; Rothermel et al. (2022) note how MRAs "juxtapose the 'glass ceiling' women face… with a 'glass cellar'" (124)–a metaphor meant to delegitimate women's issues by identifying the supposedly greater issue of men's disproportionate representation among the unemployed, unhoused, depressed, or otherwise disenfranchised. Similarly, these groups push back against feminist

campaigns aimed at ending sexual or domestic violence by arguing "that statistics distort reality, exaggerating women's victimization, while erasing the sexual violence experienced by men" (Gotell and Dutton 2016: 72). MRAs also focus heavily on what they perceive to be institutional misandry, arguing that social institutions and laws are biased against men (Schmitz and Kazyak 2016). Oft-cited grievances include a lack of social support systems for men relative to women, the favoring of mothers in custody proceedings and a corresponding denial of father's rights, unfair alimony or child support obligations (often referred to as 'divorce rape' across the manosphere), or men's risk of facing false accusations of sexual assault or domestic violence (Gotell and Dutton 2016; Menzies 2007; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016). MRA and MGTOW forums often include links to news articles or reports of personal experiences with these issues, presented as evidence of men's collective mistreatment by women and/or social structures that supposedly privilege them (Mountford 2018; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016).

Manosphere participants also construct individual accounts of men's *personal* victimization, emphasizing feminism's success in reshaping not only society, but also men themselves (Lilly 2016). PUAs and TRP portray a society increasingly dominated by women, which has resulted in the 'beta-ization of men'; they emphasize the power this supposedly grants women in heterosexual relationships (Ging 2019). PUAs and TRP also often apply a neoliberal ethos that advocates for individual solutions to this supposed problem and a shift away from a victim mentality, advocating instead for self-improvement to become more 'alpha' (Bratich and Banet-Weiser 2019; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Incels, in contrast, rely on a different interpretation of red pill theory to frame themselves as oppressed by the increased sexual autonomy feminism has granted women (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020; Menzie 2020). Rather than drawing on the biological essentialist principles of the red pill to construct an avenue against exploitation and 'beta-ization,' incels draw on this biological essentialism to position themselves as inevitable casualties of a social order that positions some men over others in an immutable hierarchy of masculinity (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020; Menzie 2020; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). Termed 'the black pill,' this variation of red pill theory argues that access to heterosexual sex is reserved only for men lucky enough to have been born 'alphas,' capable of attaining sex with any woman, or sometimes 'betas,' who may at least attain sex through women's desire to find an exploitable source of support for self and offspring. Incels position themselves as occupying neither of these categories, but rather as being positioned at the very bottom of this hierarchy, and thus excluded from sex entirely. Further, while they do identify a number of socially-determined traits that can contribute to incel status, such as poor social skills, anxiety, or unemployment, a predominant focus within the incel community is on immutable physical characteristics such as race, height, or bone structure as a cause of 'inceldom' (Menzie 2020). This belief that genetics determines incel status allows incel men to position themselves as marginalized not only by a gender hierarchy that privileges certain masculinities, but also as victims of women's shallow nature and feminism's success in granting women sexual autonomy which they then use to deny incel men access to their bodies (DeCook and Kelly 2021; Hoffman,

Ware, and Shapiro 2020). This supposed lack of access to masculine status, and to women, leads misogynist incels to conceive of themselves as excluded not only from relationships, but also from broader social life, as they believe their undesirability and position at the bottom of this hierarchy of masculinity renders them undesirable not only for sex, but for most social connections (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022).

The relative diversity of male supremacist victimization narratives is significant not only for understanding how their ideologies operate, but also because these variations may help explain the differing outcomes of participation in these groups. PUA and TRP's individualist focus also leads them to typically embrace individualistic solutions to their perceived sense of masculinity as under threat, advocating for self-empowerment as the panacea to men's ostensible oppression (Mountford 2018; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022; Schmitz and Kazyak 2016; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Within the manosphere, such self-improvement typically involved cultivating a more stereotypically (i.e., hegemonically) masculine identity–one that is sexually virile, unemotional, and unapologetically male supremacist and antifeminist (Mountford 2018; Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022; Van Valkenburgh 2018). Not only does this personal work permit men who perceive themselves as marginalized to develop a hybrid masculinity that bolsters male hegemony, but these communities' emphasis on attaining a high number of sexual partners as a metric of success leads to the incorporation of strategies for doing so that often border on, or outright constitute, sexual assault (Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). However, it is also important to note that these groups do not *always* eschew collective actions; Dignam and Rohlinger (2019), for example, note how TRP adherents on Reddit rallied around Donald Trump during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. At the same time, this shift towards collective, politicized action appears driven in large part by the fact that TRP members were convinced that Trump embodied the same sort of antifeminist, masculinist identity that they too wished to cultivate (Dignam and Rohlinger 2019). In contrast, MRAs and MGTOWs, who place a greater emphasis on the structural factors that disadvantage men, also appear to be more heavily implicated in collective acts of antifeminism–most notably the production of misogynistic online harassment, including at times large-scale campaigns against prominent figures such as Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist cultural critic focusing on the video game industry (Jones, Trott, and Wright 2020; Marwick and Caplan 2018). The most notably damaging consequences of male supremacism, however, arguably emerge from the incel community. Incel narratives of collective suffering, coupled with their fatalistic worldview, have increasingly resulted in misogyny-motivated mass violence, beginning with the 2014 mass shooting in Isla Vista, California, and ending, most recently, with a mass shooting in Allen, Texas by a man expressing views aligned with both Neo-Nazi and misogynist incel ideologies (Gais et al. 2023).

The variation in victimization narratives across the manosphere, then, reflects not only differences in men's understandings of their supposedly disadvantaged social position, but also seems to shape perceptions of possible solutions to this perceived oppression (Rothermel, Kelly, and Jasser 2022). Thus, the range of grievances

articulated by the different male supremacist groups also serves to construct a range of avenues through which antiwoman, antifeminist actions become justifiable to these men (Kaiser 2022): sexually predatory masculinity becomes a way to reclaim a supposedly ideal masculinity weakened by feminism, harassment of feminist figures becomes a form of resistance to ostensible collective oppression, and acts of mass violence become acts of martyrdom in a fight against the supposedly exclusionary and cruel forces of feminism. As such, a nuanced understanding of this variation is an important and necessary first step in not only understanding male supremacist ideology, but also in developing interventions into the tangible problems posed by organized male supremacism.

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